



Myrlie Evers-Williams
Civil Rights Activist

Myrlie Evers-Williams is a civil rights activist and former chairperson of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (1995-1998). The first female to chair the nation's oldest civil rights organization, she lifted the NAACP out of turmoil at a time when its debt amounted to \$4 million and its image suffered from a scandal involving former executive director Benjamin Chavis's use of funds to ward off a sexual harassment lawsuit. Her frankness and optimism represented a new beginning for the organization.

Evers-Williams was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and enrolled at the then all-black Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Alcorn State University) where she met Medgar Evers, her future husband and Mississippi state field secretary for the NAACP. She worked as his secretary and together they organized voter registration drives and civil rights demonstrations. As prominent civil rights leaders in Mississippi, the Everses became high-profile targets for pro-segregationist violence and terrorism. In 1962, their home in Jackson was firebombed in reaction to Medgar's organized boycott of downtown Jackson's white merchants. The violence reached its worst point the following year when Medgar was gunned down by a sniper in front of his home.

Byron De La Beckwith, the white assassin, was tried several times but was not convicted of the murder until 1994. Though devastated by the loss of her husband, Evers-Williams became a symbol of courage as well as tragedy in the civil rights movement. She and her three children moved to Claremont, California, where she enrolled at Pomona College and began working toward her bachelor's degree in sociology. In 1967, she co-wrote a book about her husband, *For Us, the Living*, with William Peters and she continued to make numerous personal appearances on behalf of the NAACP.

She remained active in civil rights work and politics, running unsuccessfully for Congress in 1970 and serving as commissioner of public works for Los Angeles in 1987. She also worked for two years for an advertising agency and for ten years she was the director of community affairs for a Los Angeles corporation. In 1988, she became the first black woman to be named to the five-member Board of Public Works by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, where she helped oversee a budget of nearly \$1 billion.



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After her term as NAACP chairperson ended in 1998, Evers-Williams decided not to run for another term and instead chose to pursue other ventures. In particular, she started the Medgar Evers Institute to promote education, training, and economic development.

In 1999, she published her memoir *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be*, which charts her journey from being the wife of an activist to becoming a community leader in her own right.

Evers-Williams has continued to preserve the memory of her first husband with one of her latest projects, serving as editor of *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (2005).

Topics:

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- Not Exactly What You Thought